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Writing Up and Down: The Language of Educational Research

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There is a marked tendency in educational research to marginalise the written word, and to be wary of what I here call its 'writerliness': its capacity to go beyond the prosaic and the utilitarian, where meaning is understood largely in terms of the success of language in reflecting reality. I note various symptoms of this in the world of educational research, but especially in standard textbooks of educational research method, where the ambition to eliminate writing is particularly evident. In its second half the paper turns to educational research as the investigation less of causes than of meaning. Here writing—finding the right words—is itself research, rather than a process that is first performed according to various protocols of method and then 'written up'. I draw on an illuminating discussion of this in Raimond Gaita's Introduction to recent editions of Peter Winch's The Idea of a Social Science *and apply it to current debate over discipline in UK schools.*

WRITING OUT: REALITY WITHOUT WORDS

There is in many areas of educational research a persistent tendency to set the written word in contrast with something like the 'real world', and to favour the latter against the former. 'Doing research' is thus somehow the real thing—collecting data, interviewing, participant-observing, weighing and measuring. Writing enters as the relatively straightforward business of 'writing down', that is to say, a process of recording: putting the interviews and observations onto paper, as if this was as direct and unproblematic as turning on an electronic device to record the interviews themselves. Writing *up* elevates the data into the register proper for the PhD or journal article—no figurative language, and certainly no literary flourishes—as well as giving an account of the methodology used. The passive voice is favoured: 'Seven school Principals were interviewed', 'Literacy lessons were observed in 23 primary school classrooms'. Having got things written down and written up you can stop writing, and there is the sense that this was always the aim. It is so important to get your research into the public domain right away that you cannot be expected to delay things by fretting over

choice of words, subordinate clauses and the mysteries of the semi-colon. Blogs, online journals, the rush to open-access publications, the emphasis on the 'impact' of research and journals where you do little more than drop your data into a standard framework all feed the marginalisation of writing in anything other than an attenuated sense.

Here are some examples from university social science faculties around the UK.[1] A newly-appointed lecturer being told that 'writing up' is something you leave to your postgraduate research assistant while you go off to chase your next research grant. Another young colleague being told that she needed to 'get her hands dirty out in the real world' rather than sit in the library. A senior academic, who brought in respectable amounts of research funding from a well-known manufacturer of children's toys, explaining that he didn't actually possess a card to use the University library, because he never used it. A departmental research meeting which was informed (misinformed) that the national panel that evaluates educational research as part of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) 'is not interested in the quality of your writing'. When it was objected that clumsy language and clumsy thinking go together, apparently the claim was corrected to 'the REF isn't interested in beautiful writing'. We want none of your fancy prose here.

In this paper I reflect on this phenomenon of the relegation of writing from a number of angles, especially in the context of the numerous published guides to conducting educational research, generally written with Masters and Doctoral students in mind. Since such students will have to write a lot of words—between roughly 20,000 for a partly-taught Masters dissertation and 80,000 for a PhD—and the published guides are usually heavy-weight publications, there is a paradox here that is interesting to explore. The nature of these guides is reflected too in the Research Methods courses that most university social science departments put on for undergraduate and postgraduate students. In the UK there is widespread agreement that teaching should be 'research-led'. There is less agreement on just what this phrase means, but it is taken to mandate the kind of course where one session is devoted to ethnomethodology, another to participant observation, another to Randomised Control Trials, and so on. This results, it is widely conceded, in the unsatisfactory situation where students opt for a particular methodology and then look for a context in which to use it, rather than starting from a research question and then thinking about how to answer it. But the Research Methods courses continue regardless, driven partly by institutional factors—faculty members will be upset if their methodology is not represented—and partly, of course, by the text-books.

In the third section of the paper, 'Just writing', I sketch a different conception of the relation between writing and research: one where writing does not so much reflect reality, or seek to put something pre-existent and 'out there' into words, as bring reality into being: the writing crafts it, conjures it (Law, 2004). It is poetic in the etymological sense of the word: a making, *poiesis*, rather than a reporting or reflecting. I shall develop the case for saying that, quite often, philosophy and history of education—the writing of the philosophy and history of education—simply constitute

research (which will be as good or bad as the quality of the writing). They are not a preliminary to research, as if the job of the philosopher was to clear up conceptual confusions and draw our attention to ethical issues before we get started, or that of the historian was to remind us that we have been here before (for example in paying teachers by results): interesting, of course, but not something that is going to affect the research findings.

The tendency to oppose writing and 'real world research' does of course have its critics in the educational research community. Participant observers, for example, worry about devaluing the voices of the community they have temporarily become part of by using a conventional, academic style for the 'writing up'. Feminists object to the patriarchal pseudo-science that neglects the emotional labour of education, of teachers and taught alike, that avoids use of the first person and that, by preferring the passive voice, occludes the inevitable elements of subjectivity and arbitrariness in research. There is an extensive literature on 'pupil voice' that concerns itself with, for instance, just how children's expressed views on maths lessons can be represented without condescension or sentimentality, and indeed whether such a diversity of views, some of them barely coherent by adult standards, or conveyed principally through body-language, should or even can be 'represented' at all. A further development of this line of thinking comes from criticism of the 'insider epistemology' that often underlies such kinds of research (Bridges, 2001). It may seem plausible that in order to understand particular kinds of people—ethnic minority school refusers, young teenage mothers in the North East of England, heroin users in rural communities—the researcher has in some way to become one of them: to be one is to know one. How can she understand their experience unless she herself has had that experience? To put it still more sharply, what can she make of their claims to knowledge and the sense that they make of their world from outside, from a world which may have a very different paradigm of what it is to have knowledge and make sense of the world? Even simple words may have different meanings: the word 'police' may mean something quite different to young people from these ethnic minorities than it does to a middle-class, white academic researcher. Only ethnic minority school refusers, it seems, can understand ethnic minority school refusers. Every group is to be its own researcher, a point captured by the slogan 'Nothing about us without us'. There is a plurality of epistemologies, a fact that makes nonsense of any one standard research methodology.

Even more problematic than this, no category of people being researched is homogeneous. Not every ethnic minority is like every other ethnic minority, and even within any one carefully delineated ethnic minority, such as second-generation, Jamaican heritage, London teenagers, there is a wide diversity of attitudes, values and behaviour. In the matter of language alone there are those in this category who cultivate standard English and adhere to mainstream 'British values' while others largely reject them as instruments of neo-colonialism and continuing oppression. Now the proliferating diversity is so great that the need to respect it in any attempted research seems wholly unmanageable. Certainly the relationship between the 'realities' being researched and any text that emerges is more complex and more

strange than can be contained by the framework of 'writing down' and 'writing up'.

The way that published guides to educational research handle this is in general curiously limited. Often the strategy is to acknowledge the diversity of approaches to research and some of the problems these raise, but then to ignore them in favour of banal practicalities. Two examples will have to stand for many. *Research and the Teacher: A Qualitative Introduction to School-based Research* (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995) includes a chapter titled 'Ethnography, fieldwork and the teacher'. Here there are subtle points made about the writing of an ethnographic text. For example, the ethnographer/teacher making notes 'in the field' is not simply recording events and data (the process of 'writing down') but 'is also engaged in the first stages of preliminary analysis from which ideas and lines of enquiry can develop' (p. 132). That is, interpretation is ineliminable from the start. However, the very next sentence reads: 'Whereas note-taking is a very basic activity, it is none the less an important one'. This is strange, given that the authors have just indicated that apparently 'preliminary' and 'very basic' note-taking is in fact a sophisticated activity, permeated with theorising. At the end of the page a series of bullet-points sets out what this procedure, both basic and not-basic, involves:

- Write on one side of the page only, normally of A4-size paper;
- Number each page of the permanent notes consecutively;
- Start a new page for each new date of the research.

The remaining three bullet-points advise the budding ethnographer to note such details as the date and location of the gathering of the data, to 'write any verbatim quotations in a different coloured pen' and, finally, not to lose the notes.

Later in the same chapter a section is headed 'The turn to textuality: the politics and poetics of ethnography'. The authors write:

> The impact of feminism, ethnic models of social research and postmodernism have resulted in what might be described as a turn to textuality, an overriding concern with the ways in which ethnography is written and the political implications of our understanding of the researcher-subject, writer-reader and audience-text relationship (p. 147).

But any reader eager to hear more of the turn to textuality is disappointed. The very next sentence reads: 'We do not wish to go into this area in depth here'. The authors promise that a later chapter will challenge 'some of the conventional views of writing up [*sic*] qualitative school-based research' that have so far been rehearsed in the book. A section on 'Poststructuralism, postmodernism and feminism' in fact takes up less than two full pages (pp. 335–337) of the last five pages of the book, in a chapter called, naturally, 'Writing up'. These are followed by less than a page (pp. 337–338) offering an overview of Max Van Manen's three categories of ethnography: the realist, confessional and impressionist. The authors note the radically

different approach to writing of what they call 'the impressionist (postmodern) tale': it involves,

> metaphor, multiple voices, collapsing time/chronology, the use of imagery, presenting stories within stories … using poetry amongst other devices. This results in a very different story, a very different way of reporting field research, but one which is striking, exciting, vibrant, richly descriptive and imaginative. … There is clearly a lot in the above discussion for the prospective writer of qualitative research (p. 338).

Struck and excited as the prospective writer may be, she may be disappointed that since the book has only two and a half pages to go things are clearly going to be left hanging. The next three sentences confirm this: 'The researcher must make of this what she will. However, one basic question looms large here. Do we write our accounts in the third person or can we use the first person?' So much for the intoxicating, 'vibrant' possibilities of writing.

The book above was selected at random: the next book was not. *Research Methods in Education* by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 7th edition: editions up to 2000 did not include Morrison) is perhaps the best known textbook in this field. My own university library has 19 copies of the various editions. The first chapter, 'The nature of enquiry', notes:

> Our analysis takes an important notion from Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 21) who suggest that ontological assumptions … give rise to epistemological assumptions. … [T]hese, in turn, give rise to methodological considerations; and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection. This view moves us beyond regarding research methods as simply a technical exercise and as concerned with understanding the world; this is informed by how we view our world(s), what we take understanding to be and what we see as the purposes of understanding; and what is deemed viable (p. 2).

What is remarkable here is that, despite the repetition—the same points are effectively made twice, the second time in reverse order—there is no mention of what Hitchcock and Hughes call 'textuality': that is, of writing. Clearly this section of the opening chapter concerns textuality: it is rightly emphasised that post-positivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism open the way to multiple interpretations, attend to the meaning of phenomena rather than their cause, and are suspicious of 'grand narratives'. But the word 'writing' does not appear. Cohen *et al*. expel textuality altogether, and unlike Hitchcock and Hughes they do so at the very start of the book, confining the nameless animal to a reservation at the end of the chapter constructed for those other dangerous beasts: post-positivism, and the other 'posts'. These creatures, the reader is told five times in two pages, are not to be approached. At most they might be 'noted' (a very short form of writing):

> While it is not the intention of this chapter to pursue these terms [post-positivism etc.] in detail, it is fitting to note their presence in the educational arena (p. 26).

> While it is perhaps invidious to try to characterise postmodernists … (p. 27).

> This interpretation of postmodernism has deliberately not discussed its role in understanding culture and cultural studies (p. 27).

> Poststructuralism, like postmodernism, has many different interpretations (we will not discuss here the interpretation that relates to semiology) (p. 27).

> There are affiliations between post-positivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, but 'we do not explore this here' (p. 28).

Versions of the same strategy can be found in many other textbooks, which—to adopt the trope—there is no space to discuss here. But in a particularly interesting survey, Amanda Fulford and Naomi Hodgson (2016) find versions of much the same tendency: the writers of educational research textbooks relegate the issue of writing to the final chapter or chapters, talk of it as 'writing up' and conceive it as a straightforward business. Fulford and Hodgson include a telling quotation from Keith Punch and Alis Oancea:

> In the traditional model of research writing, the write-up does not get done until the research is completed, and everything is figured out. 'I've done all the research, now I am writing it up'. Implicit in this is the idea that I don't start the writing until I've 'got it all worked out'. This is *writing to report* (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p. 369. Italics in original).

Thus the writing is not done until the research is finished. No writing until then, it seems, and then no writing either: merely 'writing up', or 'writing to report'. Writing, in the sense of what can be 'striking, exciting, vibrant, richly descriptive and imaginative', in the words that Hitchcock and Hughes (above) offered their reader only to tease her, is written out. And the possibility that the writing and the research are inseparable is excluded from the start. Fulford and Hodgson notice as well how the text-books slip easily into the 'micro' level (Fulford and Hodgson's term) when they turn to the issue of writing, offering advice on the use of the first or third person, proper length of paragraphs and gender-neutral language. They include (p. 150) another telling quotation, from Gary Thomas: 'Since the advent of word-processing, writing has really become a process of getting things in order' (Thomas, 2013, p. 287). Writing in all but the most banal forms has been quarantined even when it is not eliminated altogether.

THE RESTORATION OF THE TEXT

The text-book authors are right to be nervous of poststructuralism and postmodernism (there are complex connections between the two terms, but the first is more apposite here). Poststructuralists reveal as naïve the assumption that the meaning of words is always and essentially a matter of their being connected to things. This may seem to work for everyday objects such as 'butter' and 'refrigerator' ('Please put the butter back in the refrigerator'). Even here we cannot move to the claim 'the meaning of language is given by what it refers to in the real world' because there is no state of reality to which that sentence refers and thus guarantees its meaning. (This is the problem which Wittgenstein wrestles with in the early *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.) Clearly the assumption does not work for the meaning of 'and', 'however' and 'Monday'. There are no things, no objects, for these words to refer to. We may think of Monday as the day with a gloomy feeling to it, since it is the day we go back to work after the weekend, but clearly it will not mean this to everyone. The meaning of 'Monday' is that it is not Sunday, Tuesday and so on: its meaning is a matter of the way that we *structure* time. Similarly, understanding the meaning of 'however' involves grasping the differences between that word and similar terms such as 'but', 'yet' and 'nevertheless'. This insight is generally attributed to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who is regarded as a structuralist. Poststructuralists however go further. Not only is language a system or structure of differences: the structure is unstable. A dog by any other name (*le chien*, *der Hund* and so on) would be just as loyal, warm and four-footed. A rose by any other name, as Shakespeare wrote, would smell as sweet. And of course words change their meaning. Currently 'wicked' is among other things a term of approbation in UK English ('I went to a wicked party last night') and 'fit' can describe not only an athlete but an attractive person (that you met at the wicked party).

Jacques Derrida, who would generally be regarded as a poststructuralist, identifies a tendency that he calls 'logocentrism': we seem addicted to looking outside language, or text, for something to guarantee its meaning. Unsophisticated readers imagine that the meaning of a poem must lie in the poet's intentions (in 'what she was trying to say'); what is right and wrong come down to the will of God; the purpose of education is to prepare you for the 'real world'. We are desperate to pin meaning down, but only a little thought reminds us that the interpretation of a work of literature can change radically over time, we do not in any case know what a poet's intentions were, and even if she left evidence of them in the form, say, of a diary entry, this would not be the last word on the matter; and so on. Derrida summarises this in a famous phrase: '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'. The phrase is a little opaque; it is, as we might expect, hard to pin down. Literally (as we say, but there is no literalness to be had) it means 'There is no outside-text.' Derrida is not saying, as his eager critics might wish, that nothing exists except words. He is saying rather that it is more difficult than we think to get outside of language to something in the real world that guarantees its meaning. In any case it is odd to think of referring as the paradigm function

of language. As the later Wittgenstein reminds us, we do much more than that with language. He lists: 'Singing catches—Guessing riddles—Making a joke; Telling it—Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—Translating from one language into another—Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying' (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 23). We do all kinds of things with words: we live (extensively) in a world of textuality.

Given the importance of the idea of text to poststructuralism, it seems more than strange that Cohen *et al*. make no mention of text and textuality at all in their brief guide to post-positivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism. It looks less like an oversight and more like an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to erase the thought that they themselves are necessarily doing things with words—that paradox, again, of marginalising attention to textuality in a text-book—a thought that leads the reader to notice how far these writers themselves are caught up in the language of techniques and methods: a very particular kind of language, a recognisable descendant from the scientific revolutions of the late 16th and early 17th centuries and the European Enlightenment, which took science as its model.

As my reference to Wittgenstein suggests, it is not necessary to invoke 'poststructuralist' ideas from Derrida and recent continental philosophy in order to grasp the importance of language in understanding the part of human behaviour that educational research is, presumably, dedicated to illuminating; the 'poststructuralism' of theorists such as Derrida, though, has a disruptive and often discomforting power that goes some way to explaining the hostility with which it has sometimes been received and which it seems to me to show a failure of nerve to turn away from. What is often called 'analytic', Anglophone philosophy, which is frequently and unhelpfully contrasted with poststructuralism (and postmodernism), has its own distinctive way, in the hands of some philosophers at least, of helping us to see how understanding human behaviour, and so social science and educational research, does not just require sensitivity to language: in many cases it *consists in* careful attention to language—to concepts, as it is sometimes put.

Raimond Gaita finds this insight in the work of Peter Winch, and to elucidate it he offers us an example of his own in his introduction to the 2008 and later Routledge editions of Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. He invites us to imagine a 'social scientist'—we might substitute 'educational researcher'—'who wants to understand the discipline procedures in schools' (p. xxiv). Naturally, having taken the appropriate research methods modules (not Gaita's words), she thinks that 'because discipline is a response to behavioural problems it is best seen as a form of "behaviour modification"' (*ibid*.). The teachers whose discussions she sits in on however do not exclusively talk about it like this.

> They are discussing whether they should punish children or encourage better conduct by methods that one of their number is inclined to call 'bribery'. Another teacher suggests that they should encourage the peers of offending students to ostracize the student until their behaviour improves (p. xxv).

As Gaita notes, the teachers' discussion of what is to be done involves not simply the search for any kind of 'instrument they might use to modify the behaviour of their students' (*ibid*.) but thinking in terms of what actions mean. The suggested ostracisation might mean humiliation (and a devastating form of rejection by erstwhile friends). One teacher suggests that her colleagues are losing sight of the connection between punishment and justice. Where is the relationship between the offence in the classroom and the response to it if children are effectively being bribed to behave differently? Gaita writes:

> It looks as though the understanding the teachers seek of the proposals before them proceeds in the direction of distinguishing the meaning of this action from that one in ways that require a sensibility refined by literature at least as much as an intelligence refined by theory, either philosophical or scientific (*ibid*.).

We could for instance imagine the teachers' discussion proceeding with one teacher inclined to think that 'bribery' is a very loaded term when all that is being suggested is that children should see that there is something in it for them if they focus on their work. Another finds ostracisation too strong a word for asking the class to make it clear to a disruptive child that they don't think much of the way he's behaving. The teachers here are discussing some of the subtleties of the language: the connotations of the various expressions being used. Gaita writes that the teachers need to 'have an ear for those connotations. It will not do to be tone deaf' (*ibid*.). To attempt to get beyond the subtleties of language and find 'neutral terms in a science of behaviour' (*ibid*.) brings the opposite of illumination. Finding the right language simply is what is required here, which involves appealing 'even if indirectly, to art; not to ordinary language but to extraordinary language, as one finds it in poetry, for example, or at any rate, to language "used at full stretch"' (p. xxvii: Gaita is quoting Cora Diamond, 1983, p. 168).

In *Understanding Education and Educational Research* (2014), Paul Smeyers and I gave a number of examples, along the kind of lines that Peter Winch takes above, of where the crucial research in education lies in finding the right language, 'having an ear for the connotations', and not just as a preliminary for doing empirical work or work of a more 'social scientific' nature, as that would widely be understood. For instance, there is concern that education is neglecting children's well-being and happiness. But in what sense might we want children to be happy in and through going to school? Learning mathematics is difficult for most children; learning the grammar and vocabulary of a second language is plain hard work. But mastering these things can bring satisfaction, and it can open the way to further satisfactions and pleasures, such as discovering one can hold a conversation with someone in a café in France or Germany, or read an Italian novel in the original language. Reducing the academic demands of schooling in the name of happiness seems misconceived, though we might at all levels of education have more of an eye for a student who is distressed, or whose progress is frustrated by being bullied or other factors. The fostering

of self-esteem has been widely applauded as a principal aim of education, but it is far from clear what distinguishes the kind of self-esteem we want to develop from the kind that looks more like egoism. The current reduction, in the UK at least, of thinking about the value of education to calculation of the financial benefits of the passing of examinations and gaining a university degree seems to call for descriptions of education in a new and more resonant language: one that is less tone-deaf, to use Gaita's expression.

Here is one final, extended example. An increasing number of English schools are adopting discipline policies that are avowedly authoritarian, emphasising strict discipline, the wearing of identical uniforms with complete uniformity, and zero tolerance of infractions. Students are required to SLANT: Sit up straight, Listen, Answer questions, Never shout out, Track the teacher (i.e. maintain eye contact at all times). Even turning around to another child twice in a lesson means a detention. The philosophy, covering such matters as failing to come to school properly equipped, e.g. with pen and pencil, is one of 'no excuses'. An enthusiast for such policies clarifies this phrase. Writing of its implementation in the Michaela School, London, he explains:

> The same rules will apply to you whether you're rich or poor, black or white, two parents or no parents at all. Because the argument I want to set out here is that if you are not a 'no excuses' school then you are necessarily a 'some excuses school', where you are prepared to flex the rules, on occasion, to adapt to the background of a particular child. You believe in different standards for different pupils (Porter, 2016, p. 70).

This view of discipline was developed at a school in Great Yarmouth, on the East Coast of England. It included—until it was withdrawn after protests from parents—a document listing a series of rules and practices that teachers and pupils were to follow, including the suggestion that pupils be offered a bucket to vomit in if they said they felt ill in class:

> We all know children say things like that to get out of work. You never pretend to be ill to get out of work because we expect you to work through it. If you feel sick we will give you a bucket. If you vomit—no problem! You've got your bucket. That's probably all your body wanted—to vomit. If you are really ill we will make sure you get all the attention you need (*The Guardian*, 2017a).

Further revelations include the requirement for students to smile and thank their teacher after class: 'Pupils who do not say thank you as they leave the lesson are choosing to be rude. They will be punished' (*The Guardian*, 2017b).

Here there is not simply a failure to consider the meaning of behaviour, in Gaita's way of putting it: there is a refusal to look beyond actions construed in the baldest and most mechanical terms. Failure to appear in the classroom with the right equipment for the lesson (a sharpened pencil, say) may mean many things. It may emanate from a sloppy attitude towards

mathematics, requiring correction, or from the generous loan of the pencil to another child. Even law courts take motive and extenuating circumstances into consideration where appropriate. The Michaela approach deliberately excludes the language that would make possible different interpretations of the absence of a pencil, or of failure to smile. The students, and indeed the staff, are working in a regime where language is at its thinnest. It does not even allow for the distinction between discipline and compliance. It is the language of Gaita's visiting 'social scientist', the educational researcher who thinks that 'because discipline is a response to behavioural problems it is best seen as a form of "behaviour modification"'.[2]

JUST WRITING

In the impoverished view of language and textuality that we find in many of the educational research textbooks everything seems to be known in advance. When the thesis is written up there shall be a literature review, a chapter on methodology, a conclusion shyly confessing to the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research that would address those limitations. The language shall follow academic conventions, perhaps with some daring use of the first person. The researcher knows what her ends and purposes are: language is just something, like the word-processor and the statistical software package, that we use to fulfil those ends.

Some writers see language differently. Here is the novelist E.L. Doctorow: 'You have to find the voice that allows you to write what you want to write' (in Dietrich, 2015). (He might equally have said '… that allows you to write and, in writing, find out what you want to write'.) 'If you don't find the voice you don't write the book … I don't begin with a plan. You write best when you write to find out what you're writing. It's a writer's dirty little secret that language precedes the intentions' (*ibid*.).

Here is Rachel, a final-year undergraduate student writing in her (unpublished) undergraduate dissertation about her 'gap year' (which she refused to call it—as if it was a year out, a suspension of what really mattered, a void between the busyness of school and the busyness of university), spent working in an orphanage in Africa: 'There is something about that place, that continent, something about my year out, which I do not yet understand'. All I know, she wrote, is that I have to write about that year, about *there*. We might pause over this, a young woman listening for the echoes coming from another continent and from her experiences several years ago. 'I do not yet understand': not in the manner of one not yet sure of how to apply this or that statistical package to research data, or how extensively to cite the secondary literature: not even in the manner of one disappointed not yet to know, or hoping to achieve that understanding in time to sharpen the conclusion of the dissertation. Rather, her unknowing permitted her to write in different styles—diary, remembered conversations, attempts to learn the Chichewa language, sing Chichewa songs, photographs of the children she cared for, ruminations on the awkwardness of being a European carer in a culture that had its own distinctive ways of caring. The writing, she said, allowed her to do justice to some of this, but not in the sense that doing

justice was something achieved as a result of the writing. The writing—just writing—was, she said, when it felt right, the doing of a kind of justice, acknowledging her debt, acknowledging who and what she had loved and her sense of loss.

Here is the novelist and essayist Howard Jacobson, who elsewhere regularly attests to the way that writing takes him in directions he never planned:

> Language has its own power to lead the mind out of smallness. There is a fibrous, organic subtlety in words. They grow connotations. They educate the user of them to want and employ more. They are not the merely outward signs of what we have already made our minds up about: they are the means by which our minds learn to know themselves and discover what else they might come to know (Jacobson, 2017).

It is, I think, above all the smallness of most educational research that I have been complaining about in this paper. It does not lead the mind out of smallness but confirms the mind in it. It does not, in my experience, lead its reader to want to read more of it. It pays tribute to the power of language only by its efforts to suppress it.[3]

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NOTES

1. All of these have been reported to me by personal communication, under conditions of anonymity.
2. I am grateful to Anne Outram Halstead for drawing my attention to the Michaela School and for her astute analysis of its policies and practices (unpublished).
3. I am grateful to Paul Standish for saving me from a number of infelicities and errors.

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